

Commentary

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Supergenius by B. Bruce-Briggs

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SUPERGENIUS: THE MEGA WORLDS OF HERMAN KAHN
by B. Bruce-Briggs
North American Policy Press. 490 pp. \$40.00

Arguably violating several canons of the reviewing code, I called up the author of this book and asked how come it had not found a major publisher—or, for that matter, any publisher. The question seemed inescapable because (a) the book is enormously interesting, (b) its legendary subject has never had a biography, and (c) I foresaw credibility problems if I were to review favorably a book self-published by an author after multiple setbacks on the commercial front.¹

Having spoken at length to Barry Bruce-Briggs, I am still not sure of the answer to my question. What I got, mostly, were tales about the terminal stupidity and ineffable political correctness of the publishing world. I did not attempt to contact the publishers who turned the book down. Possibly I would have heard mirror-image tales of an author difficult to work with and slow to turn in a manuscript. (Bruce-Briggs worked on the book for at least twelve years.)

Another possibility is that, somehow or other, Herman Kahn (1922-83) has become a forgotten figure. But can that really be? Kahn was a “policy intellectual” of unquestioned genius and dazzling quotability who was very much onstage and telling the world what to think about its major problems for something like a quarter-century. He had also helped to develop the hydrogen bomb, and later came up with the idea for a Doomsday Machine, immortalized,

though wrenched out of context, in Stanley Kubrick's 1963 movie wherein the machine's inventor is called Dr. Strangelove. He was the author or coauthor of hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles and of sixteen books, every one of which received reviews that were respectful even when hostile. And, as Bruce-Briggs states correctly, he had thousands of "chums" (I am identified as one of them), who viewed his talents with awe and found his personality magical, somehow combining elements of a high-speed computer, an eager-to-please four-year-old child, a borscht-belt comic, and Santa Claus.

Early in his career, as a defense analyst at the RAND Corporation, Kahn's briefings—these were didactic lectures, densely factual and logically powerful but still informal, with endless asides, many of them hilarious, and much back-and-forth with the audience—were a huge hit with the military. Later, when he was running the Hudson Institute, the think tank he founded in 1961, his subject matter expanded in all directions, and his public appearances attracted a wider following. He spoke without notes, typically for a couple of hours, and had his audiences alternately entranced and convulsed with laughter. *Supergenius* does a good job of capturing the spirit of these occasions, and also confirms what many long suspected: that much of what Kahn "wrote" was made up of edited transcripts of his talks.

Bruce-Briggs, who had a good inside view of Kahn during several professional stints at Hudson, and was his co-author in a 1972 volume called *Things to Come*, has organized his book more or less chronologically but with an effort to segment particular dimensions of Kahn's life. The somewhat quirky result is 67 sections, typically five or six pages in length, with headings like "The Soldier," "The Systems Analyst," "The Celebrity," "The Nipponologist," "The Neoconservative." (Actually, for most of his life Kahn was rather nonideological.) Bruce-Briggs is on balance strongly pro-Kahn, but, as indicated in some of the headings ("The Huckster," "The Kibitzer"), less than starry-eyed.

To think about Herman Kahn is to find yourself amazed about many matters, but three major themes stand out: his intelligence; his long-running, close-to-single-handed effort to make Americans think straight about thermonuclear

war; and his remarkably successful forays into “futurology.”

A possible fourth entry would be his weight. As a young man, Kahn was merely stocky, but in the years of his greatest fame he kept putting on pounds, and must have been close to 375 when he died, quite suddenly, of a stroke. The weight seems to have induced symptoms of narcolepsy, and *Supergenius* has some appalling accounts of Kahn falling asleep and snoring uncontrollably in business meetings during his last few years (but still, somehow, managing to take in a lot of what was being said).

Kahn’s career trajectory reflected the fact that he was smarter—usually a lot smarter—than just about everyone else in his life. His parents were ambitious immigrants from Bialystok, but otherwise offered no discernible clues to the genetic basis of his off-the-charts braininess. As a young child, he was a speed-reader who needed (and created) multiple identities so that he could have more library cards and take out more books. A high-school know-it-all, he was once asked to read aloud a famous Latin oration, took a brief glance at the passage, then recited it without the book and offered to do it again, backwards.

Drafted in 1943, Kahn was identified as a prodigy after he took the Armed Forces Qualification Test and was parked in a military “brain bank” in West Virginia. There he was made to study electrical engineering before being transferred to the signal corps and assigned to the China-Burma-India theater. After the war, his friend Sam Cohen (later famous as the main developer and promoter of the neutron bomb), successfully recruited him into RAND, and his career as a defense analyst unfolded rapidly.

His early fame was based mainly on his devastating critique of U.S. military strategy in the thermonuclear age. His core objective, elaborated in *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) and again in *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (1962), was to make his countrymen understand that existing doctrine was disastrous. Its assumptions, based on the idea of a “balance of terror,” were embodied in a nightmare scenario in which, as Kahn put it, somebody, presumably a Russian, “pushed all the buttons and then walked away from the table.” The only thing deterring the Russians from such a massive and

unrestrained attack was, supposedly, the realization that it would be matched in kind—which would mean in turn that both countries would have committed suicide.

That was the theory. Although Stanley Kubrick chose not to read him properly, Kahn's Domsday Machine—a device set to blow up the planet automatically any time your country was attacked with nuclear weapons—was presented by him not as a rational strategy but as a caricature of this irrational posture. To tell the world that you equated nuclear weapons with national suicide was, he wrote, to invite blackmail—and, given the Soviet superiority in conventional arms, it left us with very few military options in the face of aggressive behavior *short* of an attack on the United States.

The point of all this thinking about the unthinkable was to find serious alternatives to annihilation and surrender. Kahn argued that the alternatives were there. Any thermonuclear war would almost certainly begin as a limited and not as an “all-out” attack, for the simple reason that the attacker would want the other side to have incentives for restraint. With that in mind, Kahn generated an avalanche of data to demonstrate that civil defense and other damage-limiting measures could leave our country still viable even after most imaginable thermonuclear wars. And he also argued that serious planning for such wars—including a “pre-attack mobilization base,” some ballistic-missile defense, and what he called a “not incredible first-strike capability”—would itself serve as a deterrent to provocative behavior, and leave us less susceptible to blackmail. Although Kahn was not alone in making this case—his RAND colleague Albert Wbhlstetter was a major ally—there is no doubt that his briefings and studies had a major impact on the Pentagon's thinking in the 50's and 60's.

At its founding, the Hudson Institute was defense-oriented, and in the late 60's it was still receiving contracts for Vietnam-related research. Kahn was deeply involved in the Pentagon's partially successful “Vietnamization” program, i.e., the effort to pacify the countryside and build up the South Vietnamese armed forces while preparing for American withdrawal. But by this time he and

Hudson had also been drawn into a broad range of social-policy issues, which gradually coalesced into a discipline that came to be known as “futurology” (a term he disliked, even as he came to be identified as its prime exemplar).

There is a mystery at the heart of this discipline. (There are also disagreements about whether it deserves the label “discipline.”) The threshold question is whether it represents merely informed speculation about the future or a serious effort at forecasting. Kahn was clear about the need for the latter in the area of military technology, but in thinking about long-term social change, his approach seems much more hedged.

One major Kahn exercise in futurology was *The Year 2000*, written with Anthony J. Wiener and published in 1967. (The analysis was Kahn’s, the writing was Wiener’s.) The authors warned readers up front that the “scenarios” being put forward should be taken only as “imaginative simulations of what might happen,” and the subtitle identifies the study as “a framework for speculation.” But I have trouble with this.

As I read *The Year 2000*, the authors repeatedly leave their cautions in the dust to argue that some scenarios are, in fact, resoundingly plausible. An intriguing example is their argument for a continuing explosion in computer power and their rejection of the then-popular notion that such power was already approaching its physical limits. It is quite possible, they wrote, that computer capabilities would continue expanding by “a factor of ten every several years”—a judgment consistent with Moore’s Law, which posits a doubling every 18 months or so. They also stated that “there will probably be computer consoles in every home,” a projection that overstates today’s reality even while managing to look remarkably prescient for 1967.

I do not know how to construct a box score, but the “forecasts” in *The Year 2000* look pretty good to me. One big error, quite unsurprising in itself, was to assume the durability of the Soviet Union, and the authors also possibly overrated the long-term dynamism of the Japanese economy (although it had close to twenty pretty good years after they wrote). But they were seldom misleading about other important matters. Their projection put year-2000 world population around 6 billion, which appears to be just about right, and one of their preferred

scenarios for U.S. gross national product per capita (they offer a couple of choices) works out to about \$37,500 in today's dollars—also right. The book foresaw relative peace and prosperity for the “older nations”—i.e., Europe, the U.S. and Canada, and the Pacific Rim countries. It also bought wholeheartedly into the idea of a “post-industrial society,” then being broached by Daniel Bell and others and now plainly surrounding us.

Kahn's record in futurology was also pretty good in later years. In 1980, in the face of headlines projecting oil prices of \$60 a barrel or more, Kahn and William M. Brown, Hudson's energy economist, forecast that prices would instead collapse, which they did (from \$40 a barrel to less than \$20). With marvelous timing, Kahn produced a 1982 book about the U.S. economy called *The Coming Boom*.

Is he really a forgotten figure today? I hope not. But it is true that the themes he was most associated with are themselves offstage. For better or worse, thermonuclear war has pretty much receded from public consciousness. And futurology—long-term, broad-gauge social forecasting—seems unimaginably difficult in a world featuring successive stunners in biotechnology. Still, I would hate to think that the man who put “thinking about the unthinkable” into the public dialogue has fallen prey to a different syndrome: forgetting the unforgettable. At a minimum, he deserves the \$15 download.

¹ To order the book, you send a check or money order to North American Policy Press, Box 26, Idaville, PA 17337. For \$15, you get the right to download it on your computer; for \$20, you get three 3½-inch diskettes incorporating the text; and for \$40, you get a bound copy of the 490-page printout, of which about 100 pages are source notes.
